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SPRING 1975

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CONSIDER A FIG

Figs are nice
in a Biblical way.

WHY?

because, listen--
Weren't Adam & Eve
Fond of Figs (?)
They cared enough
to wear fig leaves
didn't they?
Did they wear bib lettuce?
THE
answer
is
NO. They picked fig leaves.

SO?

so, listen--
The next time
you're gumming a fig newton
just before dinner
and
your mother scolds you,
Explain
that it's a sanctimonious cookie.
If
she isn't easily convinced . . .

Strip off your blue jeans
and
illustrate your story
by running
through the house
wearing
the red Nabisco triangle.

Helen West

LIGHT FROM MAHOGANY HALL

In 1917 Mayor Behrman closed Storyville under pressure from the United States Navy and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The sanctioned burning of the famous red-light district chased jazz up the River.

Scattered among the ashes of Mahogany Hall were found eighty-seven ivory keys. Legend has it that the eighty-eighth key lies in St. Charles Cemetery with the corpse of an old Negro Musician.

All of the regulars at the Cafe Perdu had emptied into the streets except for an old man who sat alone at the bar. It was late, but tonight there would be no chance of sleeping before morning. It was the last night of the Carnival. For two weeks, the Quarters had not slept and . . . tonight was no different . . . only more intense. By dawn, the streets would belong to the winos . . . those forgotten creatures of sober intentions who sprawled comfortably in curbside entryways. With the sun . . . they, too, would stumble off to wherever it is that winos find daytime shelter. The old man hated to see them. They moved like they had sand in their joints . . . it was torture to watch them walk. He would be sure to leave early so he would not have to see them.

"How about another, Pops? It's Mardi Gras!", said the bartender.

The old man slid his glass forward . . . without looking at the man behind the bar. The Perdu was one of the few places left in the Quarters where a regular did not have to show money before being served . . . especially during Carnival. He felt the bartender's sleeve brush the back of his hand, and he knew the glass was full. The old man studied his hands. They were good hands . . . age and dampness had not yet robbed them of their delicate strength as had happened to many of the others in his profession. He depended upon his hands . . . and he took care of them. BUT . . . tonight was different! It was Carnival . . . . . he was drunk.

The day had been pleasantly warm, but the night air came fast and the large cypress door remained shut to keep in the warmth. Like everything else in the Quarters, the door had a marked history . . . it was the door of the infamous parlor run by Lulu White during the early days of Storyville. Its picture appeared on many of the nickel post cards sold in the Quarters. Usually, a crowd of people stood in front of the Perdu and took pictures . . . but the tourists seldom came inside. That pleased the old man . . . he disliked tourists . . . that is why he came to the Perdu.

Bienville was an anthill. Occasionally, someone would press a face against the window . . . leaving a foggy impression upon the glass. Uninterested by the quiet darkness within, they would turn and vanish into the swarm.

From across the street, a young musician and his girl forced their way through the crowd . . . the girl wanted to stop and join the fight for trinkets that a Jew offered to the people from his second-story balcony. She waved her arms to catch his attention. Only tourists

could afford to stay in the expensive rooms above the Quarters. That was good since it kept them away from the hidden courtyards and intimate cafes. The musician caught the girl's wrist and led her to the Perdu . . . she continued to wave her free arm at the man on the balcony until they reached the door.

"What's this place?", she said.

"A quiet place where we can talk", he said. "We haven't had a chance to talk all evening."

"Who has time to talk? It's Mardi Gras!"

"Come on", he said . . . and they went in.

The old man saw the couple's entrance in the mirror that was the back wall of the bar. He could tell they were not tourists . . . tourists did not stay in the Perdu if they happened to venture inside – there were other places more exciting. The couple took a table in the rear under the fan that hung motionless from the ceiling. The old man watched in the mirror as the girl applied dark red lipstick from a silver tube. He could not remember the last time a lady sat in the Perdu . . . he was drunk.

From across the room, the musician recognized the old man at the bar. There was no mistaking him for anybody else. On the bar was a paper bag from which stuck the brass bell of a cornet.

"Do you know who that man at the bar is?", said the musician . . . nodding with his head.

"No . . . who is he? One of your jazzer friends?", she said still applying lipstick without looking toward the bar. "Say, what kind of place is this?"

She stopped coloring her lips . . . just long enough to let him know that she didn't expect an answer.

"Catch the waiter next time around and get us drinks. Excuse me while I do something."

"What should I get us?"

"Anything . . . get two whiskeys."

His last words fell upon deaf ears . . . she had buried herself in her powder. He thought of her as shallow, but that was to his liking. It made her predictable.

The old man got a cigarette from his shirt pocket. He lit it . . . and flicked the match behind the bar. He gripped the cigarette tightly in his left hand . . . it was out of habit that he did so . . . he never liked to smoke, but when he played he held a cigarette. In earlier days, it had been his trademark . . . but now everybody did it. Some young players even left one dangling from the corner of their mouths while they played . . . it made the crowds laugh to see the smoke rising from the horn. Now the old man only smoked when he was drunk.

The musician reached the bar and took the stool next to the old man.

"Hello, Pops", he said. "How are you?"

"I'm good . . . how's everything?"

"Things are good . . . noisy tonight . . . but still good."

"That's why you came to the Perdu . . . because of the noise?"

It's interesting in here. Besides . . . the music is good. Famous Lambert is supposed to play later", he said. "How about a drink?"

He focused on the paper bag with the protruding brass bell.

"From one jazzer to another?"

"The booze is on the house tonight", said the old man. "Soon as Harry sees you, he'll fix us up."

Harry was right there . . . he poured whiskey into two smudged glasses. In the dim light, they made the liquor look cloudy. Neither man noticed.

"Say, Pops, my girl and I caught you at the Paddock this evening – it was a hell of a show – I've never seen the Paddock as crowded. Jesus Christ, himself, could not have gotten a seat once you took the stage!"

The old man swallowed half his whiskey and slammed the glass down hard on the bar . . . gold drops splashed his hands.

"I whored myself", he said. "And . . . you know it. Those monkey-suits, that bastard music and those goddamn tourists. It was a circus . . . a goddamn circus and old Pops was the main attraction – a whore-clown!"

"Then why did you do it? The Paddock could have gotten anyone they wanted to play tonight. Christ . . . they had the best in the Quarters to choose from . . . and they picked you."

"I needed the money", he said.

That wasn't the real reason . . . but he did need the money – and it sounded good. The young musician could not understand the real one . . . it would be like experience telling passion to wait. The band started up with a blues traditional. The old man recognized it as "JUST A LITTLE WHILE TO STAY HERE".

"That's why I come here", the old man said . . . motioning toward the band with his glass. "I guess it won't be long when even the Perdu will change – everything changes, given time . . . except the blues. Good blues is like good liquor, it's as good after you've swallowed as it was going down! It's what's inside that matters . . . that's what I learned in Storyville."

The old man was quite intoxicated, and he talked in bolts of thoughts. Harry refilled the glasses and wiped the bar where the whiskey had spilled. The musician watched the old man light another cigarette. He noticed the strong hands . . . and how the fingers worked harmoniously to perform the required operations of smoking. They were sensitive hands . . . they could belong only to an artist.

Storyville came to the old man more easily lately. By day, the ladies and octoroons sunned themselves on the balconies overlooking the dusty street . . . like turtles on a flat rock. Night chased them inside to dimly lighted parlors. He had spent warm nights walking Basin Street, always to stop in front of Mahogany Hall. Music and light came from within. From the street, he could watch the man at the ivory piano. Black hands pounded out the blues. He did not hear what he was playing . . . he felt it! The blues shined his black face with sweat . . . he did not know what he was playing . . . it just came from within . . . it was his music that came from the ivory piano . . . the whoring went on upstairs.

"Well, Pops, it happens", said the musician. "We can't always be on top."

" . . . could take the Streckfus Line up the river."

"Yeah, there was that time, Pops", he said. "How about another shooter?"

Pops lay face down on the bar . . . he slept.

The cypress door opened and in came some of the streetlife. A paunchy, red-faced man headed for the bar. He motioned for Harry. He was not a regular at the Perdu.

"You got a jazzer here?", he asked the bartender, pointing to the cornet of the bar.

"That's Pops' horn. You know . . . Pops Fenton . . . the Pops!"

The red-faced man smiled and slapped Pops on the back.

"Carnival spirit sure caught up with you, old timer", he said and turned toward Harry. "He deserves it, though . . . gave a hell of a show at the Paddock tonight . . . I was there."

The man finished his drink in two swallows and reached for his wallet. The first bill was a twenty.

"That's not necessary . . . drinks are on the house tonight!", said Harry.

"Just a little something from my friend over there."

The man stuffed the bill into the bell of the cornet and patted Pops on the back. He slid from his stool and walked out the door.

"Another round for you, young fellow?", Harry asked the musician.

"No, Harry, had enough for tonight", he said as he pulled the twenty from the cornet.

The musician walked back to his table. His girl was talking loudly to a young boy who had slipped in behind the red-faced man. The musician put his hand on the back of her chair.

"Come on . . . let's go."

They pushed their way through the crowded street, stopping where a man was throwing beads and small coins from a balcony. The musician balled the twenty . . . and threw it above the crowd.

"What are you doing?", the girl said.

"Nothing!", he said and continued through the crowd.

Inside the Perdu . . . the old man was dreaming of Storyville and the ivory piano.

Steve Vitek

SKIRMISH AT MIDGAARD

Cracking rocks in the knobby field
I discover the voice of Loki,
his growl the hollow stun
of summer sun on broken stone.
    Noise feeds on its echoes.
    The day unfolds like crystal
    within the geode shell.
Laughter of an exiled god
thrown from Asgaard, cast like a die on his skull —
chips of flint, sparks biting skies.
My mallet follows its arc, falling
on huge stone-shaped clouds.
    Lightning shows the seams.
    Golden bracelets on my wrists.
    My shadow swallows the gorge.
Loki fears the rain that falls
and falls through the rain he fears.
His laughter like a dart

R. T. Smith

"Wreckless" June Robinson

REPLY

Blue cheese
and crackers
and those firm
pears
you bought
are waiting--
so get up
without complaint.
The same sun
draws the crocus up
that has our chilled fruit
beading in the heat.
All things
smell of cornflower blues.
of old wood
and linoleum,
of early summers
and of kitchens over-run
with too much slanting sun.

Cyndy Anchors

- - - - - -

in the middle of December
at 2:30 in the morning
i wanted to wake up and feel you
    wrapped around me
    like a half-opened Christmas present

M'Lou Greene

MOONBURNED

That summer night
at Jenny's lake house
hung heavy and boring
like her Aunt Belle

She & I
swam all afternoon
watched the sun squat into the water
ate our Kentucky Fried box dinners on the dock
and nursed our blistered shoulders

Well . . .
what now?

We
had tired of rummy and slap jack
and "Man from U.N.C.L.E." was a rerun

Well,
what do we do now?

shh-
skinny dip at midnight
shh-

Cotton nightgowns
under cotton sheets
whispering
the time
the route
the tools

Round eyes
scanned the beach
through the bedroom window--
No moon.

Parents in bed
towels
flashlight ON
barefeet

crickets & mosquitos awake

shhh. . .

Tiptoe
back door
back steps
grass
dry sand
wet sand

shhhh. . .

Wet sand
wet sand
wet sand

shhh. . .

Nightgowns on beach
flashlight OFF on nightgowns
towels on flashlight OFF

shhh. . .

Ankle-deep
splash
echo

SHHHH. . .

Mud bottom
chilly wet
chilly bottoms

shh. . .

It's so dark
It's good it's dark.

shhh. . .

SPLASH
GASP
Quick
Quick
Quick
Quiet

SHHHH. . .

Towels on
flashlight ON
Quick
Run

SHH. . .

Wet sand
wet sand
wet sand
dry sand
grass
back steps
back door

shhh. . .
Tiptoe
Quiet

shhh. . .

Close the door

WHEW

shhh. . .

Didn't YOU get the nightgowns?

shhhit.

Helen West

THE NEXT CABANA

Each Monday, Wednesday and Friday Janet climbed into the back of the Cadillac and seated herself behind the black-suited, redfaced chauffer for the long lazy ride to the Creek Club. The Creek club was on Long Island and it was twenty miles from Aunt Inez's house. Aunt Inez never went on those afternoons because two until four was naptime and she always took long naps. Then, there was cocktail hour to consider and this was when she came to the club for a long gin and lemon before a long dinner in the glassed-in dining room.

The trees bent into the breeze as the car eased toward the big stone gates with the creek bird on top standing on one leg. "Surely his leg gets tired," thought Janet, but soon her attention was drawn to four golfers standing and waiting by a green patch of grass just inside the gate. As they approached the back club, that familiar feeling started. "Why even though the pool is a salt water pool and I can easily float," she thought, I am still afraid. I wouldn't like to hit the step, or hit my head on the peeling blue wall under the water." Something about under the water frightened her and yet once when the pool was emptied for cleaning, it looked harmless enough – just four blue walls and a drain. But when the big pipes were opened and the water rushed in from the sound, she became frightened again. The tone of the pool changed and it became a dark and strange world. The bathhouse was like the bathhouses at the public pools in her small hometown and never did seem to go along with the rest of the club. There were spiders in the corners and mildew on the walls, and the boards she stood on to shower had splinters which stuck into her feet. And right outside were white coated waiters bringing drinks to women in expensive bathing suits holding cameras with zoom lenses to capture forever the white sails out on the sound.

Once in the water, the feeling left. It was cool and the day was hot and the water made her feel secure as long as she was able to touch bottom. As she swam along from wall to wall, there was a great crash into the water. It was Cal, the lifeguard jumping in to give some child the courage to follow him. The child stood gripping the side of the pool with his pink toes and he was crying and looking back at a fat blond woman in a pink bathing suit. As she swam to the other side of the pool, she noticed that the usual afternoon cabana crowd was there. A blob of people – bodies with slick oily coats and dripping hair and hands clutching drinks of different sizes. In the cabana closest to the pool on two chaise lounges were Captain Pat and Eloise. Eloise was a mousy sort of girl who always seemed to be wherever she was for no particular reason. Now and then she checked her watch and looked at the sky and commented on the sea gulls. She knew about Eloise and Captain Pat because they lived on the estate next to Aunt Inez. They lived in the gatehouse and it always seemed strange that they didn't live in the big house at the end of the drive with Captain Pat's father. The old man lived all alone while the two women lived down the drive. They were not people who were taken seriously and yet there was always a crowd around them milling about with drinks and helping each other with suntan oil. Their conversations usually concerned the regattas planned or over, trips to East Hampton and the latest models of the Jaguar. She usually overheard the conversation from her cabana next door as she sat waiting for Aunt Inez to come for the cocktail hour. She was anxious to listen because their lives seemed so full of life and expectation. They never noticed her except to say hello now and then but she was only fourteen. One man usually sat with them and rumor had it that he was a Russian prince who left Russia many years before. He was a large man who carressed

his drink as though it might be some model he was building. He would hold it up to the light, put it down and tenderly take a large mouthful. He didn't talk much but when he did it seemed that all of those people would listen silently until he stopped. And then there was a silence for a moment before the hum started up again. She was glad that the walls of the cabana were thin so that she could hear the conversations because it passed the time.

The boats were sailing silently by through the blinding streaks of light on the water. She dried her hair and sipped a ginger ale and thought how good it would be to be a part of that buzzing cabana next door rather than sitting alone waiting for an old woman to come and question her about how well she had swum that day. She dreaded the trip back to the house and the long evening that always lay ahead while Aunt Inez poured over her Wall Street Journals. And she would sit on the hot leather sofa and read old books Aunt Inez thought it proper for her to read.

The conversation in the cabana was suddenly loud and there was a lot of moving about. Someone had brought a shell up from the sound and was pouring water on someone else to cool them off. This seemed great sport at the moment. The boats went by one by one. Then Eloise was standing in her cabana looking down at her. "Would you like to join us for a round or two," she asked. She was invited to join them. She. "Well, yes, until my aunt comes. Thank you." No one seemed to notice that she was there for a moment but a man automatically moved over on the swing and made room. She tried to look older than fourteen and crossed one leg under the other and rested her finger on her cheek. And then in a moment of silence as the laughter died down, the group surrounded her. "What is a southern girl doing on Long Island – yes, they knew Aunt Inez – a lovely person – did she intend to stay long." They talked of their own trips South to Aiken where she had never been – of the pastures and horses she had never seen and of the fun train rides they had taken to get to those places to see those things. Someone offered her a gin fizz. She knew that they thought she was older than fourteen and she suddenly felt like one of them. She picked up her bottle of sun oil and splashed some recklessly on her shoulders. "Thank you – very light," she answered. Captain Pat brought it to her from the bar at the back of the cabana. Her fingers shook as she took it into her oily hands. Suddenly Captain Pat stopped and took her hand and held it up. "Why look at these hands – her fingers – why, she is only a child. Here I am contributing to the delinquency of a minor." They all laughed at the witty remark and one man spewed out a mouthful of lemon gin on his hairy leg. Captain Pat took the drink away and said "Why you little devil, you would drink it too, wouldn't you. How about a Shirley Temple instead – something more suitable."

Janet's face burned as she slowly walked back to her cabana. As she stood in the back behind the dressing screen she could hear them laughing and talking about southern girls, and then Aunt Inez walked up holding a new beach coat she had bought in the city. They sat and watched the boats glide silently by and talked of needlepoint and good boarding schools only faintly aware of the animated conversation that floated from the next cabana.

Clara Seagrave

A crazy Sunday
filled with books and stories
    sun and rain
waiting for the end
until tomorrow.
A crazy Sunday
    mixed like a highball
        of people and water
recreation and sympathy.
No one died
        the funeral parlor was full
a hearse covered by flowers
    empty with the casket
the shadow of a body remains.
A crazy Sunday
    dances and debutantes
        teas and weddings
the funeral of life.
phantasmagorically entwined
until another
                tomorrow
another Crazy Sunday.

Emily Nixon

STAR - FISHER

You drag me up
with your great taut net
as if
through the depths
you've seen
me
scurrying about
in the dark slime
of the sludge-bottomed sea.

Then
You lift me up
with a careful worn hand.
See!
My barnacles glisten with salt
and I can look you
in the eye
and not be blinded.

Melanie Snow

FOR SUE

Dance sister.
Dance the songs you offer up.
David at his Father's Ark
could do no more than throw his body into words.
Dance my sister--
word by word.

Cyndy Anchors

ODE TO ARABELLA

Consider
a
spider
as it
tip
tip
tip toes
on 8 legs
along
the silk it has spun
as it
free
falls to another
level
held by the tiniest, shinest thread
then
waits . . .
in hungry anticipation
of
an ignorant fly
the
spider
is a
sucker

(and the fly gets sucked)

Helen West

TENDER VITTLES

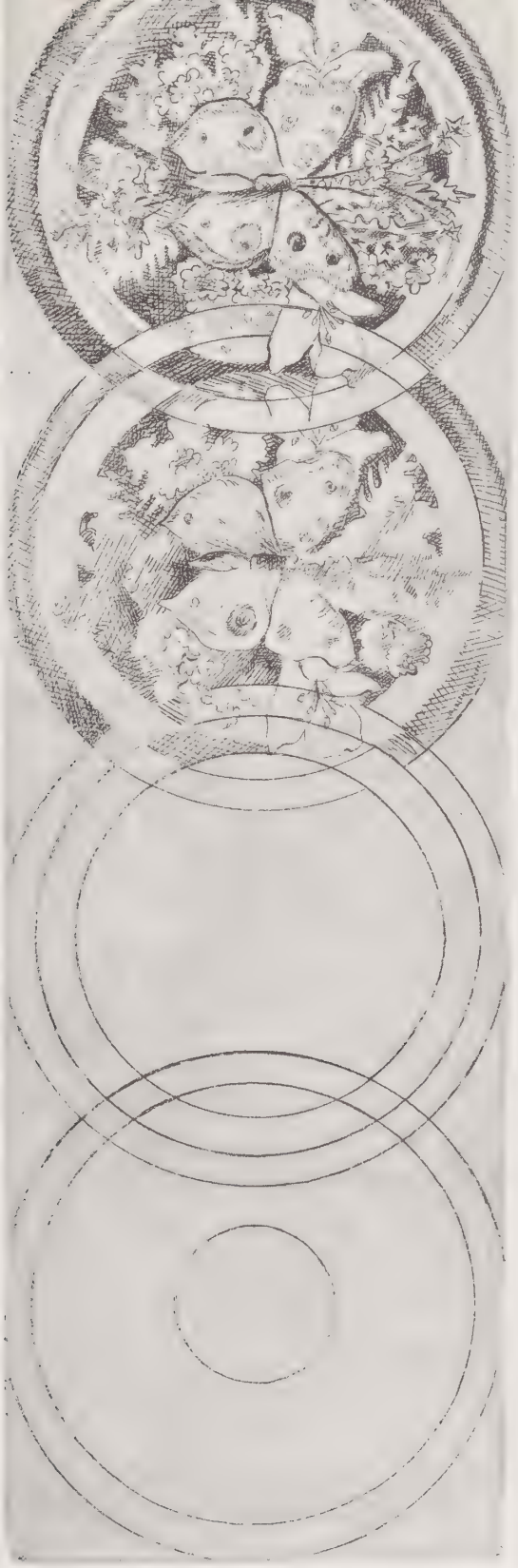
Animal crackers in my soup . . .
Crackerjacks in the audience
The tigers are having dinner already
There is one among them —
lithe golden commanding
He's a younger feline (not yet striped)
Studded and spangled — all ready, •
See how he stalks!
He alone is hungry and unfed.
Tell him
dinner is simmering.
In Box C.
On Row 3.
In Seat 6.

Melanie Snow

i don't know you

hello & help my citadel recover
from the overload
you remember
the bus trip from san jose
how i went to the back
many times
many times
returned pale-faced
as if
i had devoured
the dusty
countryside.

Errol Miller



"Paper Weight"

Martiti Camp

MY RABBI WARNED ME OF A TIME LIKE THIS

O--
Fat Angel--
Zeppelin of Heaven--

Are you happy?
your silvery wings are not tarnished
your robes are white
your halo is in place

Are you happy?
you tithe
you say your prayers
you take the bread & wine

You frowned
at
"bread & wine"

Still hungry, angel?

So sorry.
but
The CHURCH
canNOT afford
a
Second Helping

You must be
an Old T -
imer

You probably prefer
milk & honey,
huh?

But now
You've no other choice:
You are what you are
You are where you are

Appreciate your bread & wine
or
it'll be fire & brimstone for breakfast!

Helen West

blistered from romance wheels turn
do not slobber over sex
in
the long ending
it will disappoint you
move on
move on to virgin territory
clean
untapped
how high the moon
cover device
the poems tumble out
lie poised
among the satin lace
that speaks.

Errol Miller

Out beyond the breakers and the houses
Far out to the end of the island
Where the sea oats still wave
And the green choppy grass still gives
Birth to cockleburs
There the little silver minnows float
All the way up to the shore
They wiggle and nestle among the tiny
Waves that try to impress the sand

He caught one
He actually did---took his old shoe
Kicked one to the shore
For bait
For his sharp, rusty, we'll-all-get-lockjaw-hook.
But before the murder
I saw the tiny minnow
As much more than a fish
His silver shone brighter than mother's hutch
His colors turned as he wiggled out of the shrimp-smell palm
His body was wonder

In the end
All the color, all the sheen
Was taken and driven onto a hook
He wiggled and died
"They make the best bait, better than blood worms."
He took his line and cast it out
The minnow had gone back to the deeper part of the sea
And the boy, the boy never moved from his place on the shore.

Mary Ann Farrell

HEALING
(to Wilfred Owen)

Send the
mustard
home
and
let us feel
it stick and
cool in
bomb-shell
muck.

Send it
home when
we forget
to feel
it curse
and cloud
the lung.

Send it home
when breath
comes easy
and
we forget.

Cyndy Anchors

TRAPPING THE WEB

While morning mists still shine,
shrouds unwind,
and the garden is damp as birth
with dew. First
catch the silver lining
of the spider's slick mandala.
Spray a finished plaque
a shiny ebony – black
for the artist's ensign.
Press the dark wall, still wet,
to symmetrically spun
corners. Let the velvet hunter's net
stick, a deadly wire on night.

Frame it like a mirror and hang
it in the hall. Hang it where
widows must stare
at its cool design,
a mirror of the mind
of Death.
There.

R. T. Smith

Ellen Templeton

He told me about the beach
i didn't believe the story
    just a fabrication of his mind
He told me about the quiet
water reaching around his
                leg
sometimes with anger
    sometimes
with playful caresses
making him a part
    making it a part.
He told me about the moon
    bowing gracefully on each
    white-bearded wave
smiling at the sand crabs
    as they hustled in-and-out
around-and-around
under-above
            the waves
He let me feel the sand
    cling to his moist toes
wind-blown hair
half-baked sea shell
He let me walk with him
past the noisy crowd
            shoving
to gain entrance to the
Pavillion

He took me fishing
    as he baited hook after hook
waiting with patience
while crabs teased his line
The shrimp lay nice and slimy in
their paper sack
almost smiling at us as if they knew
we'd never catch a fish.
He sat and waited
never talking
just pointing and thinking
i never saw what he did
only waves and clouds and sun.
He changed them into pictures
while i tried to dream.
He caught his fish
    large and wet
    slipping from his grip
as he kissed it with his eyes
as i learned to imagine
the clouds waves and sun.

Emily Nixon

CONTRIBUTORS

Cyndy Anchors is a senior at Queens and co-editor of Signet. She has published in the Cairn and National Poetry Press Collegiate Anthology as well as a member of Sigma Upsilon Literary Fraternity.

Martiti Camp is a senior art major, her etching "Paper Weight" is in this Signet.

Mary Ann Farrell sends work from Davidson, North Carolina.

M'Lou Greene is a Queens sophmore.

Nina Huff's self-portrait, "Me" appears in this issue's Signet.

Errol Miller is from Monroe, Louisiana.

Emily Nixon, a senior member of Sigma Upsilon Literary Fraternity and has published in National Poetry Press Collegiate Anthology.

June Robinson's etching, "Wreckless" appears in this issue.

Clara Seagrave is co-editor of Signet. Her short story, "The Last Cabana" wins third in the Signet contest.

R. T. Smith is editor of the Cold Mountain Review. He has published in Sanskrit, Southern Poetry Review and others.

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Ellen Templeton is Signet's art major and designer of this issue's cover.

Steve Vitek, a Davidson student is winner of first place fiction award for his short story, "Light From Mahogany."

Helen West, president of Sigma Upsilon and Signet business manager wins first place poetry prize for her work.

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